MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. DAY

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

REMARKS & INTRODUCTION OF JESSE JACKSON

It was during the school year 1959-1960 I recall. I was in my first year at the University of Chicago Divinity School and Chicago Theological Seminary — the Reverend Jesse Jackson's school — I graduated the year he began — it was a long time ago, on a Sunday morning that my wife and I, and her parents I recall, decided to attend worship at Rockefeller Chapel. The preacher that morning was a young minister from Georgia – who I

had never heard of. The word was that he was a great preacher, a distinguished scholar and a rising star in the still new — at least to people like me — Civil Rights movement. His name was Martin Luther King, Jr.

I was mesmerized. Here was a preacher like none I had ever heard; learned, scholarly, literate — all of which one experiences a lot at places like the University of Chicago: but also passionate, fiery, deeply committed to the behavioral — and social — and economic and political implications of his literate and scholarly theology.

Here — in this man, what he was saying and how he was saying it was what was so completely from my

experience of Christian faith — and most especially, the Christian Church: the mainline, middle class, overwhelmingly white church.

Reinhold Niebuhr had said somewhere that the Civil Rights Movement saved the mainline church from irrelevance in the mid-Twentieth Century. That was largely my experience.

I loved the theology, the history, the psychology. I even loved Greek. I just couldn't figure out what the church – the church as I had experienced it — had to do with it. It seemed to me that following Jesus was pretty much a matter of private, personal preference, a Tillichian affirmation of my being, a Kiekegaardian leap of faith which didn't

have anything to do with the institutional church, or with other people in any form.

Until I heard and started to pay attention to Martin Luther King, Jr. with his insistence that the great affirmations of the Christian Faith and the Christian Church are just words until they begin to shape the way people live in the world, and shape and mold the institution that claims the name, Church of Jesus Christ.

I wasn't sure the church had anything to do with anything until I heard Martin Luther King, Jr. read Amos 5:21

"I hate, I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your

solemn assemblies…..

But let justice roll down like waters,

And righteousness like an everflowoing stream …

I wasn’t sure what church was for until I heard Martin Luther King, Jr. read and preach Micah 6:6:

“With what shall I come before the Lord

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings

with calves a year old?…

He has told you, O mortal, what is good:

And what does the Lord

require of you
but to do justice, and to
love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your
God.

Martin Luther King, Jr. — put Christian faith together for me and for thousands and thousands like me. What he said and did — raised the level of our theology — our ecclesiology and our personal faith. And what he did inspired new personal commitment to Jesus Christ in lives of sacrificial and sometimes risky and often controversial obedience.

King wrote:

“It has been my conviction — that any religion that professes to be concerned about the soul of man and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried.”

The world was changed profoundly by Martin Luther King, Jr. His “I Have a Dream” speech at the Washington Monument was a moment that wove Civil Rights — the equal treatment of all Americans — the equal opportunity of all God’s children deeply into the soul of America.

He died a martyr and in his name, we know that the cause he espoused, and taught

and fought for and suffered for and died for is a good cause, still an urgent and relevant cause, still worth our commitment, because – as he knew – and taught us – it is God's cause.

I have the privilege of working for a Journal of Theology and Culture as Editor/Publisher. It is called *The Christian Century.*

Martin Luther King, Jr. was an Editor at Large, and a frequent contributor to the magazine.

And, in fact, when his Letter from the Birmingham Jail, was written, Dr. King choose *The Christian Century* as the journal to publish the letter in its entirety. That we did. The Associate Editor who corresponded with Dr. King and received the letter, and then edited it for publication, Dean Peerman, still works for *The Christian Century*. I talked to him Friday and he gave me a copy of the original letter from our office to Dr. King acknowledging his permission and desire to have the letter published in our magazine.

A portion of that letter and a picture of Dr. King hangs in the lobby of our office

downtown. Every time I go to that office I see his picture and nod in his direction and thank God for who he was and what he did.

The portion of the Letter — which we have enlarged and displayed on the wall is the following:

> Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability: it comes through the tireless efforts of men (and women) willing to be co-workers with God: and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively in the knowledge that the time is always

ripe to do right." (June 12, 1963, *Christian Century*)

One who knows about tireless effort, hard work, and using time creatively, is the Reverend Jesse Jackson.

He needs no introduction.

We are honored to welcome him to Fourth Presbyterian Church Pulpit on this occasion.

Jesse Jackson has been a tireless advocate for the poor, a spokesperson for the marginalized, a voice for the voiceless. He has taken his message and ministry to the

whole nation — in its political processes, its economic strategies and its social dynamics. When someone is in trouble — when a lone man or woman or child is caught in a social or political dynamic and about to be swallowed up: a welfare recipient about to be evicted from her home — U.S. Soldiers captured and languishing in prison about to become prawns in international politics — we have learned to count on Jesse Jackson to be there with compassion, courage, faith — asking for justice.

It is my honor to welcome him and all of you to this very important occasion.